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## **Geographical Indications, Sustainability and Competition Law: Navigating the Intersection of Quality Standards and Sustainability Agreements**

The relationship between geographical indications (GIs), sustainability, and competition law is unique, shaped by the intertwining of social, economic, and environmental dimensions within agricultural communities. Initially, GIs—such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)—were created as market tools aimed at protecting or enhancing agricultural producers' income while promoting the environmental and human factors integral to food production. This required a tailored regulatory framework intersecting with competition law through specific legal instruments.

However, with the European Union's evolving sustainability agenda, notably through the Green Deal and Farm to Fork strategies, GIs are aligning with sustainability imperatives. This shift is exemplified by Regulation EU 2024/1143, particularly Article 7, which empowers producer groups to adopt sustainability practices that exceed baseline legal requirements. These practices, covering areas like environmental protection and social equity, underscore the growing role of private actors in shaping sustainability governance. Simultaneously, the coordination required among supply chain actors to implement these initiatives presents challenges in competition law. In this context, the relationship between sustainable agriculture and competition law is being recalibrated, requiring new regulatory instruments. The Farm to Fork strategy explicitly acknowledges this, stating that "to support primary producers in the transition, the Commission envisages clarifying the competition rules for collective initiatives that promote sustainability in supply chains." Reflecting this shift, Article 210a in the 2024 CAP introduces a significant exemption from competition law for sustainability agreements. This provision allows producers to collaborate on sustainability initiatives, provided these agreements aim to exceed minimum standards set by EU or national law. The exemption applies to both horizontal and vertical agreements, recognizing the need for coordinated efforts to enhance environmental sustainability across the supply chain.

This paper follows the European Commission's guidelines on the application of Article 210a and presents a case-based analysis to explore the implications of these regulatory changes. The findings reveal a distinct economic and legal framework, where sustainability—aligned with the objectives of Article 39 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)—opens new opportunities for farmers and communities.

This framework integrates social, environmental, and economic objectives, highlighting the crucial role of private actors in ensuring rural sustainability.

In conclusion, the combination of GIs, sustainability agreements, and competition law exemptions creates a pathway for sustainable agricultural practices. This legal framework fosters cooperation among supply chain actors, supporting the EU's broader aim of developing sustainable food systems while addressing the social and environmental needs of agricultural communities

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